

Maiden Speeches

In the mid-1950s, a veteran senator offered the following advice to newcomers. “There are two kinds of congressmen—show horses and work horses. If you want to get your name in the papers, be a show horse. If you want to gain the respect of your colleagues, keep quiet and be a work horse.”¹ From the Senate’s earliest days, new members have observed a ritual of remaining silent during floor debates for a period of time—depending on the era and the senator—that ranged from several months to several years. Several explained that by waiting a respectful amount of time before giving their so-called maiden speech, their more senior colleagues would respect them for their humility.

Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette was anything but humble in 1906. Believing he had been elected to present a message that none of his more seasoned colleagues was inclined to deliver, La Follette waited just three months before launching into a major speech. That address consumed eight hours over three days and filled 148 closely printed pages of the *Congressional Record*.² As he began to speak, most of the senators present in the chamber pointedly rose from their desks and departed. La Follette’s wife, who observed from the gallery, wrote, “There was no mistaking that this was a polite form of hazing.”³

Decades later, freshman Senator Bob Dole, like La Follette, considered three months long enough. He chose April 14, 1969, for his first address. In that instance, he selected a personally important date—the twenty-fourth anniversary of the day he was wounded in Italy during World War II—to discuss challenges that confronted disabled Americans. Following another ritual related to this first speech, he made a point every year, on or about April 14, of delivering a Senate address on the problems of the disabled.⁴

For most of the Senate’s existence, the tradition of waiting several years for the first speech has more often been cited as a ritual than actually followed, although Senator Edward M. Kennedy waited more than a year and a half before his initial speech. He timed that speech—on civil rights—to capture the symbolism of the Independence Day holiday in 1964. The tradition of paying attention to “maiden speeches” remains important to senators. When a senator decides to make that first address, word goes out to friends, colleagues, and the media who might wish to come to the chamber to observe the event. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton drew major national attention when she delivered her first speech—on her priority issue of national health insurance—just twenty legislative days after taking the oath of office.⁵

1. Senator Carl Hayden (1927-1969), *Washington Post*, February 19, 1956.

2. *Congressional Record*, April 19, 1906

3. Unger, p. 144.

4. Address by Senator Bob Dole, March 28, 2000, Senate Leader’s Lecture Series.

5. *Congressional Record*, February 13, 2001, pp. S-1241-42 (daily edition).